



SOLUTIONS

A publication of Samaritan Counseling Center of the Capital Region

VOLUME 24, ISSUE 2

www.samaritancounselingcenter.org

Summer 2010

Relationship Lessons from “King Lebron” and the Culture of Narcissism

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Let me start with several important confessions. First, despite claiming I wouldn't watch in protest, I did join the ten million plus people following Lebron James' team-pick fiasco on ESPN. Second, I think Lebron James has been the most exciting player in the NBA in recent years. Third, I believe former Schenectadian Pat Riley is a genius for pulling it off. But, although it was exciting— in the end, I am disappointed.

In reading all the reactions to the way Lebron cashed in on his “free agent” status, I couldn't help but think there are significant lessons to be learned. While his decision may turn out to be a good one for him, not to mention the Miami Heat, the whole process reflects too much of our culture. Consider some lessons from the Lebron process:

First, it reflects something rather obvious. Lebron mentioned he had to do what was best for him. In saying that, his needs came before the needs of Cleveland, a city that worshipped him. In the end, self came before the system.

Basketball aside, western culture tends to put the needs of the individual before the needs of the community, as Robert Bellah pointed out in his classic book *Habits of the Heart*. While it is one thing for a professional basketball player to “cash in,” too many people find it easy to put their needs before relationships. “*I have to take care of my needs*” is often an excuse for leaving a relationship, ignoring the needs of children, or even staying disconnected from the pain of the less fortunate. The celebrity culture of professional sports has often promoted this way of thinking and encourages it in our young people.

Second, the process, and especially the ESPN drama, looked more like a lengthy infomercial, as one writer called it, than serious news. In the end, it was self-promotion at its worst. Never mind the fans, but teammates and the general manager from Cleveland were hearing his decision for the first time on TV instead of through personal contact. When did it become acceptable to make professional decisions this way? The news was presented very callously to the loyal fans of Cleveland, and the grandiosity of it all was a bit over the top.

Christopher Lasch, in his book *Culture of*

Narcissism, described our culture as one that is self-absorbed. Self-promotion seems ever present— from Facebook pages to image consultants to personal coaches to blatant advertising. It is the “me generation.” Loyalty and community take a backseat to self-promotion. In a recent movie called *Solitary Man*, Michael Douglas plays a fragile, narcissistic man who alienates his family while hoping to deny death and aging by promoting himself. Every significant religious tradition talks about the danger of “hubris,” of pride coming before a fall, of the dangers of desire. In the upside down logic of Jesus' teaching, he suggests that those who try to be first will be last, but that we gain a true self by attempting to lose self. Buddhist teachings say that suffering begins with striving for things to be other than what they are. While balancing personal needs with the needs of the system is a complex spiritual and psychological task, the “culture of narcissism” may have tipped the balance.

Finally, the Lebron story reminds us of the illusion that there is always something more sexy and appealing out there and that we should always be moving toward it. In fairness, living in South Beach sounds much more exciting than living in Cleveland, but there is

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something problematic and a bit depressing about the way it was handled. In our quest for the “idolatrous,” or the shiny golden calf, we lose the capacity to be awake in the moment, to practice gratitude, and to find satisfaction in the present.

In the end, I hope LeBron James does well in Miami (although I will root for the Celtics.) But the spiritual and relational lessons cannot be ignored. Working with the pull of desire and self-promotion is at the core of most spiritual traditions. Kierkegaard says that when these lessons are ignored, they lead to “the sickness unto death.”

Part of the important work of Samaritan Counseling Center is to help people grapple with this deep human dilemma— balancing needs of self, the systems we are part of (families, work, society) while integrating the wisdom of the spiritual traditions. 




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Solutions is published by **Samaritan Counseling Center of the Capital Region**, 220 North Ballston Ave., Scotia, NY 12302, (518) 374-3514, fax: (518) 374-9193, online at www.samaritancounselingcenter.org.

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